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The Return of the Author
through Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*

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Abstract

The following essay attempts to prove that Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" falls short in describing Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*. Since the book is the result of the collaborative work between the writer and Valentino Achak Deng, the text contains a multiplicity of voices that intend to be heard, and have an impact on not only South Sudan, where most of the action takes place, but also the audience. Thus, one of the expected outcomes of the narrative is to support financially a non-profit organization created by Eggers and Deng. The spatial dimension of the book, however, is not the sole common element between textual meaning and actual facts. Although Eggers frames his work as '*a Novel*', the text is based on Deng's life and is historically accurate. The Sudanese Civil War shaped Deng's infancy and identity. Therefore, the recounted events are not to be confined to sheer fiction due to their significance in terms of power disparities and human rights violations.

1. Introduction

Post-structuralist theory has focused its attention on the writing in itself and its ‘special voice’, leaving the writer behind. Nonetheless, the argumentation of this paper attempts to prove that Roland Barthes’s concept of the Death of the Author falls short in describing Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What* on the grounds that it fails to account for the identity claim immanent to Postcolonial Fiction.

The aforementioned book radically challenges the concept of authorship, as the complete title of the book illustrates, *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, a Novel*. While the spatial dimension of the text is connected to Valentino Achak Deng and the experiences of the Sudanese community, Eggers frames the book within the category of a novel, the subgenre of which is a fictional biography. Thanks to this, the “initial relationship of moral difference to the reader” typical of the biography, in which an apparently wise and successful figure speaks to a rather plain and ordinary public, is abolished; besides, the audience is confronted with the remaining consequences of the unequal power relations of Colonialism, which are usually unknown to the readership (Yost 2011: 151). Thus, the overlapping of three different voices, Eggers, the actual Deng and the protagonist leads to a political positioning and a potential collaborative social action towards the narrator and his cause.

Prior to the publication of *What Is the What*, both Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng created a non-profit organization to provide educational opportunities in South Sudan. All proceeds obtained by means of the book sales are controlled by Deng and donated to improve the schooling conditions in the region. Therefore, the role of the author further extends to the spreading and selling of the text, with an underlying humanitarian philosophy and project, given that the book attempts to have an impact beyond its pages.

2. Theoretical Framework: the Death of the Author

In “The Death of the Author” Roland Barthes attempts to put an end to the traditional key role of the figure of the author. English empiricism, French rationalism, the Reformation, Positivism and Capitalism have led to the praising of the creator. Nonetheless, what seems to really matter is the text in itself for the “utterance in its entirety is a void process, which functions perfectly without requiring to be filled by the person of the interlocutors: linguistically, the author is never anything more than the man who writes, just as I is no more than the man who says I” (Barthes: 3).

Barthes places the language at the focus of analysis, leaving behind the background of the author as a means of interpreting the text. Removing the ‘Author-God’ implies an infinite number of readings that can no longer be judged as right or wrong. The Nietzschean allusion refers to the loss of absolutes. The ultimate signification does not exist due to the lack of authorial control. Hence, the reader is decisive in the construction of the meaning or, that is to say, “the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination” (Barthes: 6). The writing is not a “confidence” (2) of the creator, as traditional criticism has often claimed. This is why the idea of not only the author but also the critic should be questioned.

One of the other elements that Barthes points out is that a text “has no other origin than language itself” (4). On the one hand, the topic of intertextuality is raised given that “a text consists of multiple writings” (6). On the other hand, however, the writer does not pre-exist or transcend the text. As Seán Burke describes,

For should it be that all thought proceeds necessarily by way and by virtue of language, then the absence of the subject from language translates into the absence of the subject or consciousness from knowledge. If knowledge itself, or what we take to be knowledge, is entirely intradiscursive, and if, as it is claimed, the subject has no *anchorage* within discourse, then man as the subject of knowledge is thoroughly displaced and dislodged. (14)

Moreover, according to Barthes's essay, the function of language to represent reality is not to be expected, which is due to not only the aforementioned 'origin' but also the profusion of significations that an utterance might convey. In Barthes's words, "to write can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observing, of representing, of "painting"" (4).

3. The Boundaries of Genre

The definitions of literature and its genres have always posed a challenge to literary critics. Although there are no ultimate explanations, different scholars have attempted to account for these concepts extensively. The following sections endeavour to summarise the main characteristics of the novel and the auto/biography, as well as to relate them to Eggers's work *What Is the What*.

3.1. The Novel

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a novel is “an invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience, usually through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting”. The fictional element introduced in the definition becomes a crucial point in order to analyse Eggers's text. The author frames *What Is the What* in terms of genre by means of the subtitle *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, a Novel*. Thus, from the very beginning Eggers establishes that the events that are to follow do not present a one-to-one correspondence with reality.

Northrop Frye, nevertheless, raises a counterpoint to the former definition for “in assigning the term fiction to the genre of the written word, in which prose tends to become the predominating rhythm, we collide with the view that the real meaning of fiction is falsehood or unreality” (1967: 31). It is precisely between these two poles, reality and fiction, that *What Is the What* emerges. While the novel is based on the real experiences of Valentino Achak Deng and the history of South Sudan, it is overtly acknowledged that certain elements have been added in order to produce a complete narrative. The following fragment belongs to the book's preface, which is the only part that has been written by Deng himself.

It should be known to the readers that I was very young when some of the events in the book took place, and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What Is the What* a novel. I could not, for example, recount some conversations that took place seventeen years ago. However, it should be noted that all of the major events in the book are true. The book is historically accurate, and the world I have known is not different from the one depicted within these pages. (Eggers, 2008: xiv)

Furthermore, Maurice Z. Schroder's reflections on the narrative genre point out that "the novel records the passage from a state of innocence to a state of experience, from that ignorance which is bliss to a mature recognition of the actual way of the world" (1967: 14), which can also be applied to our object of study. In Achak's words, "it was the beginning of the end of knowing that life would continue" (75). The protagonist's story commences when he is a child living in South Sudan and comes to an end once he has moved to the United States, and has bitterly realized that he might not be able to accomplish many of his former projects.

In opposition to the lyric, the novel is widely considered to have a written form. As Stevick argues, "novels tend to differ from pre-novelistic narrative in the extent to which the novel is a printed, rather than an oral, form" (1967: 6). In the case of *What Is the What*, however, the oral component plays a decisive role. The story has been built up thanks to Valentino Achak Deng's contribution. "Over the course of many years, Dave and I have collaborated to tell my story by way of tape recording, by electronic mailings, by telephone conversations and by many personal meetings and visitations" (xiv). Moreover, the book introduces a number of the Lost Boys' stories that have also been orally transmitted, which creates an effect of folk literature. Although oral literature is of big significance throughout the African continent, it is beyond the scope of this paper to dwell on its implications further.

3.2. The Auto/Biography

A comprehensive definition for biography is the following:

Often seen as a subcategory of historical writing, biography is, like history, nonfictional and narrative, with the passage of time playing an important part in its structure. [...] It differs from history in that its scope is limited by its subject's birth, death and actions. Its distinction from fiction rests on an extratextual relationship of trust between author and reader: for a book to work as a biography, its readers must believe it to be "true", based on verifiable evidence in a way that novels need not be. Finally, it differs from autobiography in that its characteristic split between biographer and subject (i.e. they are not, as in autobiography, one and the same person) produces unique aesthetic and ethical problems. (Jolly, 2001: 109-110)

The implications of "historical writing" and non-fiction are of objectivity and demonstrability. Nonetheless, Poststructuralism radically questions such assumptions by considering the author a void 'I'. As Cheryl Walker describes, "though biographical criticism was a respected genre forty years ago, contemporary attacks upon it force one to have recourse to some set of strategies in order to continue connecting authorial biography to textual meaning" (1991: 110). Thus, the bond between the author and the work or, in other words, reality and fiction is at stake.

If we are to reject authorial control over the text, the biography becomes an imaginary account, and the autobiography turns into a novel with an unreliable first person narrator. The word autobiography attempts to delude the readership by claiming, first, that the events in the text have actually occurred and, secondly, that the protagonist can be identified with the author. Taking into account Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author", there is no possible coincidence and, if there were, it would be irrelevant for the origin of the text lies in intertextuality. Thus, following Barthes's argumentation, the correspondence between fiction and reality is of no significance to the analysis of the text. On the other hand, what matters is the correlation of the object of study and previous forms of literature containing a similar 'discourse'. The reference material to examine the text is to be found in other narratives rather than in actual facts.

Frye, however, holds an intermediate opinion. As he states, "autobiography is another form which merges with the novel by a series of insensible gradations. Most

autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern" (1967: 35). Although he considers autobiographies to be fictional, the texts do present a connection with their author. This connection, though, is not absolute and, as the critic acknowledges, might be altered for the cohesion of the text.

Furthermore, life writing, be it in first or third person, has also been regarded as establishing a moral superiority towards the audience. Brian Yost affirms that "biographies assume the significance of the individual and individual accomplishments and have the aim of replicating the values and behaviours of their subjects in readers" (2011: 151).

Though subject to criticism, whereas life writing claims to provide a reliable picture of reality, what distinguishes the novel is its fictional character. Eggers's book embodies this dichotomy between fact and fiction, which is already indicated by the subtitle. Thus, the text has to be simultaneously analysed as a novel and an autobiography. Michelle Peek even argues that "*What Is the What* exhibits self-awareness about the various genres it draws from and transcends, openly rehearsing their generic complexities: the humanitarian narrative, autobiography, the human rights bildungsroman, fiction, testimony and oral history" (2012: 118).

At the intersection of reality and imagination, Eggers's book is to be considered a fictional autobiography, which has inevitable consequences on the approach of the audience. According to Philippe Lejeune, if the text is presented as fiction "the reader will attempt to establish resemblances in spite of the author" (1989: 14). Conversely, if the text is labelled as an autobiography "the reader will want to look for differences (errors, deformations, etc.)" (14). This is why the audience is willing to empathise with

Achak and they are not concerned about historical inaccuracies or the precision of dialogues. “Reformulating the [Lejeune’s] “autobiographical pact” allows Eggers and Deng to turn potentially skeptical readers into advocates and donors” (Peek, 2012: 120).

Another consequence of categorizing the book as a fictional autobiography is that the text abolishes the “initial relationship of moral difference to the reader by treating the unique accomplishments of an individual subject as the products of superior individual behaviors” (Yost 2011: 151). Once this difference is dissolved, the author, or authors, appeal to the shared humanity of the audience and the protagonist, and generate a bond between them.

Hence, the intertwining of voices challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions about the novel and the autobiography. It is worth pointing out that the actual writer of the novel is not the protagonist despite the statement in the subtitle regarding the genre.

From the title onwards, the figure of the author/s plays an active role in the development of the text. The collaboration of Eggers and Deng leads to a series of well-planned and conscious decisions. Since neither of them claims the complete authorship, the multiplicity of voices becomes a key element to question the boundaries of genre. Although Deng intends to spread his real experiences worldwide, he declares in the preface that he is not a writer and that he is aware of the limits of memory. Eggers’s intervention transforms the text into fiction. However, Deng’s story cannot be confined to the imagination for it would trivialize and undermine the disastrous consequences of the Civil War in Sudan.

4. Historical Background

Eggers's text describes the personal experiences of Valentino Achak Deng before, during and after the Second Sudanese Civil War, which took place from 1983 to 2005. The confronted parts were the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The conflict ceased with a peace agreement and South Sudan gained independence in 2011.

From 1898 onwards, Sudan was under British and Egyptian control. However, the northern and southern administrations remained different in terms of their language and religion. The Muslim North used Arabic, while the Christianised South tended to adopt English and maintained the original languages such as Dinka or Bari. Throughout the decolonization process, the British attempted to provide Sudan with its own government separate from the metropolis. The administration, however, was placed in the North and was also in charge of the southern provinces. The South felt underrepresented and opposed the loss of home rule.

The political situation became more difficult when the northern government attempted to spread Sharia law among the southern provinces. Nevertheless, one of the most significant causes of the war was the existence of petroleum fields between the two territories, which implied foreign interests and pressures. The central government attempted to control the resources, as they are of major importance to the economy of the land. Furthermore, the government sent armed militias to depopulate the South. Thus, the SPLA emerged in South Sudan as a rebel group in order to recover their autonomy.

The war had enormous consequences on the civil population. The systematic attacks on the southern territory led to a massive migration flow towards the neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya, where there were refugee camps.

In addition, according to UNICEF, over 16,000 child soldiers had been enlisted in both armies. Many of these children were forcibly recruited or joined the army in order to protect themselves or their communities. Victims claim to have been sent apart from their families, given scarce food and compelled to participate in gun battles. Not only were the children injured but also did they see their friends being killed or dying due to malnutrition.

5. The Spatial Dimension in *What Is the What*

The aforementioned migration flow from Sudan to Ethiopia and Kenya included a vast number of Nuer and Dinka orphans travelling in groups on foot in order to escape their country. These orphans were known as the Lost Boys of Sudan. The journey could be up to thousand miles across the desert and the travellers relied on the charity of the passing villages for subsistence. The number of deaths became truly substantial given that the children were exposed to starvation, dehydration, heat exhaustion, pneumonia, malaria and predatory wild animals. Furthermore, many of the orphans were recruited as child soldiers.

Achak reiteratedly claims his identity in terms of the traumatic journey that Valentino Achak Deng was forced to undergo. Throughout the text, the protagonist attempts to give a very detailed account of the migration and all the risks it implied. The socio-political situation in Sudan shaped his life events. Such an experience gives way to the voice of Deng and his community. As Mayer conveys, “in a field as concerned with disparities of power, access, and legitimation as the field of postcolonial writing, the poststructuralist dismissal of the categories of the author and her agency seemed to be frivolous and cerebral, given the ongoing relevance of these constructs in the social and political world” (Mayer, 2014: 151). Denying the correlation of the text with Deng’s experiences equates to silencing the Sudanese community. In addition, if their ordeal were to be considered fiction, interpretations in favour of the war would emerge, which is precisely the opposite reaction intended by the author/s.

One of the biggest aims of the book is to bring to light the human rights violations taking place in Sudan during the conflict. Eggers and Deng deliberately examine the burning of villages, the enslaving of young girls and the enlisting of child

soldiers so that a wider audience becomes familiar with the events. This is why it is legitimate to establish a connection between the occurrences in Sudan and the testimonial narrative of Achak.

Moreover, Achak is also concerned with the prevailing inequality and discrimination that he has faced since his moving to the United States. “But while Sasha told us that in America even the most successful men can have but one wife (...), he did not warn us that I would be told by American teenagers that I should go back to Africa” (Eggers, 2008: 18).

The protagonist is confronted now and again with a black hierarchy that has been previously established by African Americans. Since the character belongs to the recent newcomers, he is not accepted within the community. According to Martyn Bone, “*What Is the What* challenges the dominant definition of Atlanta as an “international city”, a global capitalist space of flows, by bringing into focus the everyday experiences of Atlanta’s most truly international residents – its immigrant population” (2010: 68).

The contribution of Eggers and Deng allows the text to be defined as transnational. Eggers plays an active role in broadening the scope and including the United States as another scenario. “I knew the book needed to be not only about Valentino’s experiences in Sudan and the camps, but also about the many unforeseen struggles of his life in the US” (Eggers, 2007). Throughout the book, Achak refers to his former expectations, such as higher education, that seem to shatter in the present. The United States government has provided many of the lost boys with a peaceful country. Nevertheless, they are not exempt from hardship given that educational and career opportunities turn out to be rather scarce.

The events occurring in America are not immune to unequal power relations and, therefore, have been intentionally added within the pages. Eggers has resolved to denounce injustice in both countries, avoiding, thus, “this dominant developmental narrative of progress that elides its own racist undertones” (Peek, 2012: 122).

6. The Humanitarian Project

One of the first agreements between Eggers and Deng was that the formal author was not to receive any profits from the sales. Deng would be in charge of investing the proceeds in order to improve the situation in South Sudan. In 2006, both men created a non-profit organization, The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, that Deng supervises separately. The money obtained from the book is donated to the organism. Moreover, further contributions can also be made through the webpage. Thanks to this, a free secondary school with trained teachers was built in Marial Bai, where there are no other educational institutions besides the primary level ones.

Eggers and Deng attempt to have an impact beyond the pages of the narrative. Therefore, Barthes's assumption that the text "has no other origin than language itself" proves not to be valid for the analysis of *What Is the What*. The book has emerged out of the necessity to disseminate the inhumane consequences of the Second Sudanese Civil War and to do something about it. In this case, there is no writing for writing's sake given that the text presents the external goal to repair and reconstruct the country.

In addition, the relationship between Eggers and Deng is far from a condescending one, in which a prosperous western citizen helps the incapable African. Instead, both men are deeply conscious about the socio-political situation in South Sudan and pursue an improvement in the educational opportunities for the civil population. Nevertheless, "Eggers refutes entirely the notion that the US is the utopian refuge and haven for exiles" (Yost, 2011: 161-162) given that "he [Deng] feels his sufferings in the US are more outrageous and inexplicable, since here people have more than everything they could possibly need while in Sudan there was at least a material explanation for crime" (162). Throughout the book, the United States is presented as a

scenario for violence and inequality. There the protagonist is faced with racism, robbery and murder. Thus, Eggers carefully elaborates the discourse of injustice by including both Sudan and the United States, which is another argument to claim that the author does exist within his text.

7. The Need of an Audience

Although one of the aims of the essay is to refute Barthes's thesis on "The Death of the Author", the role of the audience is not to be questioned. Postcolonial fiction attempts to give voice to the unheard and to obtain a response. This is why this communication process cannot be completed without a receiver. In Mayer's words,

It is not enough to just tell stories, to find a voice, to express oneself: One needs to also find and sustain audiences for these stories, to generate attention and to provoke reactions, to keep stories in circulation, until they finally take real effects in the social and political realities worldwide (2014: 150-151).

The many interpretations and reactions coming from the readers are to be listened to. A point often raised by literary criticism regarding *What Is the What* is whether Deng loses his voice by not writing the story himself, which would contradict his ultimate purpose: "The stories emanate from me all the time I am awake and breathing, and I want everyone to hear them" (Eggers, 2008: 29). Hence, it is worth analysing the effect the book has had on a wider audience than the academia by focusing on two reviews published by *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

The former openly celebrates the contribution of the two parts resulting in one book. "We readers are the fortunate beneficiaries of this collaboration. Eggers's generous spirit and seemingly inexhaustible energy (...) transform Valentino and the people he met on his journey into characters in a book with the imaginative sweep, the scope and, above all, the emotional power of an epic" (Prose, 2006). Although Prose does not dwell on the intertwining of voices, in the review Deng is recognized as an indispensable element for the creation of the narrative.

Reading "What Is the What" does indeed make it impossible to pretend that Valentino Achak Deng and the other Lost Boys and all the men and women and children who have suffered, and continue to suffer, fates like his do not exist. Dave Eggers has made the outlines of the tragedy in East Africa – so vague to so many Americans – not only sharp and clear but indelible. (2006)

Raising awareness has also been accomplished. As Prose argues, the West has now been faced with the crude reality of East Africa. A statement has been made to bring to light the injustice that the Sudanese people underwent. Besides, the reviewer mentions the lack of information of ‘so many Americans’, which is also present in the book.

The writer also acknowledges American flaws that can be found in Eggers’s work. “The book opens in Atlanta (...) where, in the first chapter, his apartment is broken into by thugs, thus confirming his growing awareness that violence is not an exclusively East African problem” (2006). Thus Deng and Eggers have successfully highlighted disparities in America.

Prose’s reading does not confine the book to fiction but does not label it as life writing either. “Intense, straightforward, lit by lightning flashes of humor, wisdom and charm, Valentino’s story – novel, autobiography, whatever – is an account of what it was like to be one of the Lost Boys of Sudan” (2006). Her interpretation is empathetic and trustful towards the protagonist.

The title of the second review published in *The Guardian* is already very revealing: “A lost boy who found his voice”. The presence of Deng within the text has been recognized beforehand. Furthermore, Adams dedicates the first two paragraphs to summarize Deng’s story and his first meeting with Eggers as a means to introduce their collaborative work. As the analysis unfolds, the double authorship is not only acknowledged but also praised. “Eggers’s ventriloquism could hardly be bettered. He makes Achak’s an authentic and affecting voice of the grimmest narrative of our times, and it is, you might say, a nicely reciprocal arrangement” (Adams, 2007).

Moreover, the reviewer seems rather sceptical to limiting the text within the category of the novel. “That story has been presented as a novel, though Eggers has

noted in the past, in his postmodern way, that the distinctions between fiction and literary non-fiction are, to him, ‘sort of meaningless ... they are fraternal twins. You can barely tell them apart’” (2007). There is no need to draw a precise line between what might have been added to create a narrative and the factual events in Deng’s life for the text in itself is plausible and telling already. *What Is the What* has been approached as an eyewitness account: “by adopting Achak’s voice, Eggers could play it entirely straight without losing credibility” (2007).

Adams admits that the collaborative work is to have an impact on the readers. The work of Eggers and Deng has triumphantly reached an audience and successfully transmitted a message.

Achak is lucky to have found Eggers to tell his tale; Eggers is fortunate to have it to tell. The novelist, not surprisingly, given his rhetorical track record, makes a world-class ‘charity mugger’; he buttonholes you and makes you listen; and if this book doesn’t change your life, it might well change the lives of others (2007).

The communication process between Deng and the audience has been accomplished. Both interpretations acknowledge not only his voice within the cooperative effort but also the socio-political disparities in Sudan. This is why *The New York Times* does not clearly lean towards one genre and *The Guardian* is not comfortable with the category of ‘a Novel’. Since the two readings refer to the present western awareness of the situation in Sudan, a future social action is being pointed to.

8. Conclusion

The argumentation of this essay leads me to confirm the Return of the Author as a means to understand and interpret *What Is the What*. The book challenges the concept of authorship through the pre-established dichotomy between novel and autobiography. The fictional character of the former genre merges with the tragic and actual experiences of Valentino Achak Deng. Nevertheless, it is Eggers who is in charge of the narrative. Thus, the multiplicity of voices or, in other words, the acknowledged collaborative effort points to the connection between textual meaning and real facts.

It is worth noting that Deng does not lose his voice given that it is his own decision to have the story written, as stated in the preface. In this part he authorises Eggers to recount the life events taking place in South Sudan and the United States. Moreover, both authors devise a wider project than the book itself: the creation of a non-profit organization to improve the educational opportunities in the African country. Another intended effect of the text is the dissemination of the consequences of the Sudanese Civil War and the remaining power disparities. This is why the notion of the audience becomes indispensable, as they are a means to effect change. The interpretations analysed recognize Deng as part of the creation process, and appreciate the exposure of the conflicts endured in order to prevent the West from turning a blind eye.

The cooperative work translates into a discourse of inequality regarding both the United States and South Sudan. Eggers himself has admitted to have included the former country in the text. Therefore, the narrative has been carefully designed and elaborated to depict injustice as a common element between the two nations rather than an isolated feature of South Sudan. All in all, the presence and intentions of the author/s are latent throughout the pages from the preface to the very end.

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